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MEANEST MAN
I EVER KNEW



SERMON

BY

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The possibilities of Heaven and Hell lie concealed in every man. Jesus and Judas—these two names are sufficient to indicate the height and depth of human possibility. Depravity and divinity are the nadir and the zenith of the soul's thermometer. The greenish streak of human meanness is to be found on the tear stained page of the story of the race. For cruelty who can equal Attila, the king of the Huns, and called by his victims "The Scourge of God." For bigotry who can surpass Queen Isabella of Spain, in the fifteenth century? Listen to her words: "I have depopulated happy villages, rich towns and fertile districts in the holy name of religion." For tricks of cruel cunning who has achieved a more unenviable reputation than Ceasar Borgia, who would in-

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vite his enemy to a banquet and then deposit a few drops of swift poison into a loving cup. For personal ambition, cold and relentless, where shall we find a more striking illustration than in the words of Napoleon III—"Give France a war every four years and the people will be content." For a secret manifestation of meanness in the private affairs of life, where shall we look for a more cruel circumstance than that recorded in the autobiography of Edgar Allan Poe, who says: "In infancy I was fed on mild concoctions of liquor in order to keep me quiet." He died of delirium tremens, in a Baltimore hospital, on October 7th, 1849. Read the sad comment on his own life: "My life has been a terrible blending of temper, impulse and passion." What's that mean? A life cursed by cruel neglect and professional meanness. His trained nurse had chained him to an evil habit before he had clambered out of the cradle.

But in the brief time allotted to me I am not called upon to present a historical review of any particular phase of human weakness or depravity, but rather to cull from my own experience and observations certain unusual and outstanding incidents and events which will tend to arouse the careless and cause the wayward to think. Truth is stranger than fiction, and the story of every life has in it certain elements of universal interest.

I was a boy of fourteen, when I

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witnessed a scene which stands out like a perfect motion picture on the screen of my youthful imagination. I stood in the scantily furnished parlor of an earnest Christian woman, when the property owner—the landlord—entered the room to demand a month's rent IN ADVANCE. According to the deed and contract it was due on that very day. The head of the house was absent seeking for employment. One plan after another had failed. One hope after another had faded in the mother's heart. Everything had gone wrong. Her rent was paid up to that hour, but she could not pay the rent in advance. She did not know, then, where the next meal would come from. I remember the scene distinctly. The landlord stood there, tall, sallow complected, with lips compressed. Bringing his stout cane down on the worn characters of the old parlor carpet, he exclaimed: "The rent, madam, the rent, one month in advance, by this time tomorrow, or I will land every piece of furniture you have on the sidewalk!" With that he disappeared through the door, closing the same in a manner sufficiently suggestive to give an added emphasis to his words.

I was a boy of fourteen, with a boy's curiosity. I had a boyish fad—a fad for meetings. Where two or three were gathered together in the name of God or man, I was there. Prayer meetings, political meetings, social gatherings and Sunday school anniversaries were all of equal im-

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portance to me. Among my list of special attractions was the "noon meeting," held daily, at the time indicated in the building of the Young Men's Christian Association. I was a regular attendant. I knew every "crank," "exhorter," "prayer meeting killer" and rising religious orator to be heard at the noon hour, in yonder benevolent institution. What was my youthful consternation when I beheld in the personality of the impatient, imperative and unreasonable landlord, one of the recognized leaders of the faithful band which presided over the destiny of the "noon meeting." How often in the after days have I heard him as he "approached the throne of grace," enriching his petitions with such familiar phrases as "Dear Lord," "Blessed Master" and "Omnipotent Jehovah." But the fervor of his eloquence had lost its charm. Something in my soul rebelled. My boyish heart uttered bitter words. I said to myself, "You are the meanest man I ever knew!" How little I knew of the world or of men, or of human nature! Was he the meanest man I ever knew? I wonder!

At thirty years of age I resided in a manufacturing town in Western Pennsylvania. I was engaged in a line of business which brought me in contact with the leading capitalists and men of affairs in the community. Most of these I knew well and a few I knew intimately. Among my inti-

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mate friends there was one whom I counted it a high honor to know. A man who had Puritan blood in his veins, stern, upright, unselfish and true. He was the successful manager of a great manufacturing concern, an officer in the church, a teacher in the Sunday school, a leader in the Young Men's Christian Association and a citizen of recognized integrity and ability. This man had a son, who, socially, was as popular as his father had been successful from a business standpoint. All the fond hopes of a father's heart centered in the boy. The unrealized dreams of his own life were to be fulfilled in the future of that boy. He was to be the head of a great commercial concern, a pillar in the church, a tower of defence in the city for the ideals of a Christian civilization, yea, the very reincarnation of his father's spirit.

But an unexpected event blasted the dream. One unlooked for disaster dissipated every fond hope. The youth suffered the loss of the master motive which makes a man's life and history truly great. He lost his faith in God, in the Bible, in the Christ, and in the importance of spiritual things. I remember the day when the father told me, in strict confidence, that which seemed to be the greatest catastrophe which could have come into his life. The snapping of the anchorage of the boy's faith, the eclipse of his Christian ideals and the clouding over of the sky of his

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spiritual perceptions. How the great man sobbed as he told me in broken syllables of the subtle undermining influence of a certain high school teacher, who, by the use and abuse of his professional position as a public teacher and instructor, had gradually created an atmosphere of doubt in the mind of the young man. "Why should he," I said to myself, "have gone out of his way to sneer at the Grand Old Book and to weaken and destroy the faith of a soul in the miraculous power of the unmatched Galilean?" The strong man breathed out his great sorrow and exclaimed, referring to the recreant teacher: "I can hardly treat him with due Christian courtesy when I meet him in social and commercial circles. Oh, why should he have robbed my boy of the brightest jewel of his manhood?" and in the atmosphere of that great grief I murmured to myself: "The meanest man I ever knew! The meanest man I ever knew!" But was he the meanest man I ever knew? I wonder!

Some years ago when I lived in Eastern Canada I was called to the home of a parishioner. It was one of those cases sufficiently startling to cause a preacher to drop every ordinary avocation and make a swift and sudden response as in the case of a great emergency. I responded immediately, and reaching the residence of one of my church members, found a home shrouded in a gloom

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worse than that which is usually found in a death chamber.

For a few moments there was no one in that disconsolate circle possessed of sufficient self control to inform me as to the nature of the calamity which had so suddenly descended upon their fireside. Finally the father uttered a few revealing remarks, and it dawned upon me that their son, the first born, had become an embezzler and was at that very moment in the grip of the law. He was a young man,, about twenty, recently married, and within a few days a little one had been added to the home circle. There was just one problem—what could be done? Here was a respected citizen, a beautiful home circle, a newly organized family and a young man, who, up to the present time, had enjoyed a reputation without spot or stain. One man held the key to the situation—his employer. So I wended my way from the home of grief to the office of the merchant, where I was received none too warmly. I presented my case and in the name of father, mother, young wife and an infant newly born, pleaded for mercy.

If genuine sympathy for a heart-broken family could make a man eloquent, then I was truly eloquent. I pled, I urged, I entreated, and added appeal to appeal, but all to no effect. My tears made no impression on the merchant's heart. The loss of a few hundred dollars had steeled his heart

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against mercy. The door of the penitentiary was opening to a young man of splendid possibilities. The merchant's signature would have closed that door. One scratch of his pen and the judge would have given the youth a suspended sentence. But "No!" said the offended one, "I will make an example of him!" And when I thought of "the great white throne," by which I had urged my appeal, and of this cold, bloodless, heartless man of affairs who would rather have "satisfaction" than see a worthy home made happy, I whispered to myself, "The meanest man I ever knew! The meanest man I ever knew!" But was he the meanest man I ever knew? I wonder!

I performed a marriage ceremony in Toronto in the year 1900. The young couple, from the preacher's standpoint, were unusually interesting. He was tall, and she, not quite so tall. They seemed to be fitted for each other. Something more than the usual spirit of social courtesy was breathed into our words of greeting. When we offered the congratulations appropriate at such a time. We had a vision of a beautiful home, a happy married couple, and a Christian fireside, growing more precious with the increasing years.

But who can tell, in such an hour, what secrets lie hidden in the dark corridors of destiny? Will they be happy? Will he be true? Will she be

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wise? Will children bless the home? Will death cross the threshold? Will trouble hover like a black angel over the fireside? Will slander touch? Will gossip taint? Will ambition corrode? Will cruel circumstance invade? Oh, the future! the future! What a protecting providence—that the curtain is never withdrawn. When the future reaches us it is past and gone.

A year passed, and one evening I was called to a modest home on a pleasant avenue. The quiet, peaceful surroundings—beautiful trees and well kept lawns—made no suggestion of a tragedy within. An anxious maid opened the door. Grandmother met me in the hallway. The doctor came out of yonder room, just for a moment, and then returned. The voice of a young mother, passing through the crucifixion of nature's great mystery, and bringing her first born into the world, could be heard, ever and anon, when in a paroxysm of pain her agony became articulate. I inquired concerning the head of the house, the young husband, whose absence puzzled me, and who in a few hours, or perhaps moments would be crowned with a new relationship—even that, expressed in the strongest and well nigh the highest word in our human vocabulary, father.

The young husband, where was he in this hour of crisis? Nobody knew. But behind the screen of their well guarded silences I could detect the shadowy outline of a sad tragedy which was being enacted there.

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- Where was he? Ask the woman of easy virtue. Ask the presiding genius of a certain low born variety show. Ask the boon companions of a free and easy life. Ask the men who were holding forth to his lips the vials of a liquid damnation, just at the moment when the one to whom he had pledged his love, at the altar of God, was passing by the door of death, that a new born scul might live. When I thought of that tragedy, of the loneliness of the young mother, of the cruel recklessness and indifference of the one who called himself 'husband'—of the shame and infamy of it all—and as I thought how memory would kindle lurid lights with every re-occurring birthday in the life of the first born, I said within myself, "The meanest man I ever knew! The meanest man I ever knew!" And yet, was he the meanest man I ever knew? I wonder!

The bravest fight a man ever made is the fight against a physical appetite. The greatest hero in the world to-day is the man who is struggling against the demands of an inflamed and disordered physical frame, when every nerve centre in his body calls for drink, drink, drink. Oh, what a battle! How he fights! What prayers he offers! How he conjures up the fond faces of mother, child and loved ones, that for the sake of these, he may be able to stand! I knew a man (unworthy of the appellation) who stooped so low as to hold the foam-

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ing glass beneath the blanched face of such a soul, struggling to be free and struggling to stand and with enticing words he exclaimed: "Drink, man, drink! Show yourself a man, and drink!" And beneath the tempter's feet there burned the fires of an awful perdition, and behind the tempter's back there stood a form as of the evil one, and my soul uttered an inward exclamation, "The meanest man I ever knew! The meanest man I ever knew!" But, I wonder, was he the meanest man I ever knew? I wonder!

The saddest story I ever heard in all my life was given to me by a woman of absolute integrity and unquestioned Christian character. It was concerning a man who possessed the face of a friend and the soul of a fiend. He planned and executed the ruin of a queenly soul with a precision and forethought for which we could scarcely find a match this side of perdition. He spoke in the name of Love and reasoned in the language of Religion. He made a conquest of her heart and won the affections of her soul. He even went so far as to lead her out on a summer evening to a beautiful suburb and professed to select, with her consent, the very site upon which he proposed to build an attractive home. With a confidence which was absolute, she made a complete surrender of her heart and person.

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The flower plucked, the soul sciled, the life blasted, and the pretended lover took the first train for parts unknown. Crushed in heart, broken in hope and forsaken in life, she sank into an unhonored grave within a year. I knew her child. A strange, mysterious sorrow seemed to be written on her face. Frail and beautiful she was, but seemingly not intended for this world. The chilling winds of fifteen winters swept over her and to-night she sleeps with her mother beneath the snows of yonder prairie. Oh, could I stand upon this double grave and preach a sermon to the dawning womanhood of our Dominion, then I might stand as a barrier between many a soul and perdition.

A girl without principle is a girl without anchorage. The trinity of a woman's power is purity, dignity and spirituality. There is a modesty of demeanor, the sign and symbol of a queenly womanhood, which no true gentleman will ever encroach upon. There is a certain womanly dignity over which none but a culprit will dare to step. Keep up the standard of your life. Don't joke about religion. Don't go to questionable amusements. Don't allow any man to use profane or uncouth language in your presence. Don't visit places of whose character you are not absolutely sure. Accept no gift not in harmony with your relationship. Make no compromise for the sake of any favor, position, prospect, pro-

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motion, advantage, preference or privilege.

Beware of the man who takes the first step toward an infringement on the dignity of queenly womanhood. Beware of the man who seeks for your acquaintance aside from the recognized rules of good society. Beware of the man, who, being outside the circle of your own acquaintances, sends you a note by the hand of another. Beware of friendships, recent of date and newly made (either men or women) who suddenly lavish upon you a measure of attention and expenditure out of all harmony with the rules of social intercourse and common sense.

Father, tell me! Mother, answer me! What value do you place on your daughter? Think of yonder maiden in the hour of her birth! Behold her in the hour of her baptism. Gaze upon her in the hour of her failing health! Think of a mother's affection and a father's concern. The man who would trifle with a jewel such as that walks on the brink of an eternal woe. The man who can forget that he has a sister and that he owes to every woman the same respect which he owes to his sister—that man is drifting, drifting, drifting.

There is only one kind of anarchy of which I am really afraid, and that is anarchy in the social realm. A thief is a commercial anarchist. A liar is an intellectual anarchist. A grafter is a political anarchist. A hypocrite is a religious anarchist. A

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sensualist is a social anarchist and a home dynamiter.

There are men in every city compared with whom the cruelty of a Crippen is as kindness. There are men in every city who could blast a woman's life, break her heart, ruin her health, steal her beauty, damn her character, defame her name, crush her spirit, extinguish her self-respect and fling her into the street like the skin of an orange and then—laugh at her. In the estimation of this man, life is a joke, virtue a bubble, stainlessness a straw, affection a myth, and love a tradition. God have mercy on the man who can exchange cruelty for confidence. He would crush you as a trip-hammer would pulverize a diamond. He would destroy your life as ruthlessly as an ape would pluck a rose to pieces. He would mar your beauty as an insane man would cut the dimple from the cheek of a child. He would rob you of your good name quicker than a social gossip would slander the character of an innocent. He would destroy your health as a lion in the jungle would lick out the life of a worm. He would blast your womanhood as recklessly as the lightning strikes the earth. He would blight your hopes as thoughtlessly as the winter wind sweeps over a frozen sea. He will defame your character as heartlessly as he will pass from you to his next chosen victim.

And he will laugh at you, sneer at

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you, joke about you, speak of your ruin and boast of his conquest. He has forgotten that he ever had a mother who gave him birth; that he ever had a sister who wished him well, and that he ever had a fair friend who regarded him as the incarnation of every manly virtue.

He is omnipresent. He lurks in the business block. He is to found in the the departmental store. He curses every cafe with his presence. He is to be found beneath the shadow of every organization. He speaks in the name of religion and boasts of the spirit of a broad fraternity. He is the incarnation of hypocrisy. He is the meanest representative of a fiend incarnate which can be produced this side of hell. I believe in capital punishment for crimes worse than murder. There are men in every city, as large as ours, who ought to be taken out into the middle of the street and shot. I have no forgiveness for such a man as that. The blood of Calvary would congeal on the heart of such an unrepentent culprit as the mortal whom I am seeking to describe. As sure as right is right, as sure as God is God, as sure as the old earth revolves beneath your feet, as sure as the constellations of light sweeps onward overhead, so surely will the red hot, hissing hot thunder bolts of divine wrath fall upon the brazen brow of the betrayer and seducer. God has not forgotten to be just. There is no forgiveness for such a mortal until he has gone down in-

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to the profound depth to which he has dragged a queenly soul, and if need be, spent every dollar in his possession to rectify and redeem a ruined life and a blasted character. I have taken a good look at this man and it seems to me that he is the meanest man I ever knew—I say, the meanest man I ever knew! And yet, I wonder, is he really the meanest man I ever knew? I wonder!

The meanest man I ever knew presided over a liquor trust. He organized a blighting blast as broad as a province and as wide as a state, and presided over it. He traded in human souls and washed his hands in human tears. He laughed at human woe and turned a deaf ear to the prayers of the broken hearted. Homes were crushed that he might live, and childhood cursed that he might prosper. He lived in luxury and rode in splendor. His loved ones were robed in fabrics woven out of the heart strings of the helpless. He stood well in the realm of commerce and passed in good society, as a serpent might crawl through a bed of roses. The ruin he wrought was colossal, and every evil in a growing civilization sought protection beneath the vast bulwarks of his organized brutality. The magnitude of the slaughter of character and manhood was only equalled by the scientific precision with which the work of devastation was carried on. He was rich in his material posses-

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sions and influential in his commercial position. Men honored him in public and cursed him in their hearts. The trinity of all human evil—war, famine and pestilence grew insignificant in his presence. He had enthroned hell on the earth and given to misery a perpetual lease. So he stood forth as the incarnation of the mightiest and the meanest. I class him as the meanest man I ever knew. Organized meanness! Systematic meanness! Scientific meanness! Meanness reduced to a science! I wonder if he ever knew that I regarded him as **THE MEANEST MAN I EVER KNEW?** I wonder!